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Burntwood

Sir Christopher Kelly
Chair, Inquiry on MPs' Expenses
Committee on Standards in Public Life
35 Great Smith Street
London
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E 762

27 August 2009

Dear Sir Christopher,

I am a prospective Labour Parliamentary candidate and have worked for a Member of Parliament, Dr Tony Wright MP, since he was elected in 1992. Please accept my submission to your inquiry into MPs' expenses from the perspective of both my employment experience and as I look ahead to when I might become a Member of Parliament myself.

Accommodation: In spite of having access to information on MPs' allowances for many years, I was deeply shocked by the use of expenses by a significant number of MPs. I remain particularly concerned that expenses and allowances should not bring with them any capital gain for individuals, unless such gain can be recouped for the public purse. I would suggest that there should be a maximum annual rate for an accommodation allowance based on average rent for, say, a 2-bed flat within two miles of Westminster. This could be calculated and agreed annually but any capital gain made from such an allowance should be reimbursed. As for second homes in constituencies, it seems to me that MPs have a choice: they can either choose to move into the area they represent making this their primary base, or make their own arrangements if they choose to remain in their original or family home. This, it seems to me, would have the added benefit of focussing the minds of potential candidates on constituencies which they can get to easily, with which they have at least some affinity and on the impact upon their and their families lives in general. The public purse should not be expected to cover the costs incurred by MPs exercising personal choice or its effect on their personal circumstances.

Employment of staff: There has been significant improvement in staffing issues over the 17 years I have worked for a Member of Parliament, not least the job descriptions/pay scales etc introduced some years ago which have brought more transparency, accountability and parity. I believe, though, that individual MPs should continue to have autonomy over who they employ as the relationship between a Member of Parliament and staff member, while similar to such relationships in the wider public and private world, is essentially different because of (a) the party dimension and (b) the unique working patterns of MPs. There could, however, be rather more scrutiny of contracts to ensure that they operate within particular guidelines on hours of work, levels of responsibility and qualifications.

Petty Cash: In spite of asking for guidance for many years on the administration of office petty cash from both the Fees Office and Inland Revenue, this has not been forthcoming.

However, I have operated a petty cash account with proper records since 1993. This has not prevented accusations in the press that petty cash has been misused, simply because petty cash payments have never been properly regulated.

No office can operate without access to petty cash for items ranging from paper-clips to toilet rolls. In 2008, such payments were reduced from a maximum of £250 pcm to £50 and yet still there was no consideration of how small payments for office items should be recorded or regulated. I would suggest that, where petty cash payments are claimed, they should be made to a properly constituted office account (not directly to the Member) and should be regularly audited.

Salary: There is no doubt that MPs should receive proper remuneration for the number of hours they work and the level of responsibility they carry. I believe that it is a full-time role and so can not understand how some MPs are able to undertake other forms of employment. The argument that MPs should have continuing experience in other fields of work is a thin one: I have never been a coal miner, or police officer, or brain surgeon but that does not mean that I am unable to understand the particular pressures of these jobs. Indeed, a Member of Parliament should have enough general *life experience* to allow insight into all fields of employment, and more.

There seems to be a view that being a Member of Parliament is a career. I do not share this view. It is not a *job* in any accepted definition but a representational role and so to try to link salary to those of other professions seems to me to miss this essential point. Until recently, I was a councillor at a top tier council and received remuneration of approximately £8000 pa to represent the views of 22,000 people, just under a third of the population of an average constituency. I was also a lead member, in a Cabinet of seven members, with responsibility for a budget of over £250 million. For this role, I received an additional allowance of around £15,000. Any councillor in such a role is involved in discussions, and taking decisions, at a high strategic level alongside officers whose salary is as much as ten times higher. But, I was not an executive; I am a lay person, not a professional, and was elected to represent rather than to enact. My remuneration was fair, not excessive, and to try to link it to the salaries of executive officers would have blurred the dividing lines between our different roles.

It seems to me that MPs' roles are essentially the same as those of lead councillors. Therefore, rather than linking salaries to professions, I believe that it would be more appropriate to link salaries to councillor allowances (as proposed by Independent Remuneration Panels) and *non-executives*. This may go some way to rebalancing the link between a Member of Parliament and their constituents and curb the damaging over-professionalisation of the role.

I hope that my comments are helpful and am grateful for this opportunity to submit them to you for your consideration.

Yours sincerely,

S: Woodward